

Beyond Individual Adoption

By Joshua Zhong

It was a one-level brick house with five small rooms lined up next to each other. Each 300-square-foot room had only one door and one window. A long, U-shaped, counter-top-like bed painted green was built along the walls. Inside the narrow bed and buried underneath mountains of heavy blankets were thirty-some babies covered from head to toe, with only little faces visible under a weak, yellowish light coming from a 15-watt bulb dangling from the low ceiling. Some babies were crying. A few would struggle to move their arms and leg, only to hopelessly give up to the heavy blankets and clothes weighing down their little bodies. The room smelled filthy and damp. No nanny was in sight....

That was the Changsha Social Welfare Institute in the winter of 1992 when I first visited. I saw nearly 200 baby girls lying in those five rooms with no heat, no toys, and only a handful of disinterested nannies. I was told that more than 30% of these girls would die before they reached the age of six months!

Fifteen years later, the brick house is long gone, and built in its place is a new multi-level building with a children's entertainment center, medical clinic, rehab room, classrooms, kitchen, and children's bedrooms. Yes, each child has her or his own crib or bed, and you can find quite a few colorful toys in their rooms! It seems that there are more nannies than children!

The changes in the Changsha Orphanage, dramatic as they are, reflect the overall progress in nearly all of the 400-some Chinese orphanages involved in international adoption.

Since 1992 when China published its first Adoption Law and opened its doors to international adoption,

- More than 120,000 abandoned children have been “freed” from the orphanages and have found loving adoptive parents in twenty-three countries.
- About \$360 million (about 2.8 billion in Chinese currency) has been collected by more than 400 orphanages from adoptive families as mandatory donation or child rearing fees. These fees, according to the Chinese Adoption Law, “must be treated as a designated fund and can only be used for improving orphanage conditions.”
- At least \$50 million in additional contributions has poured into these orphanages from post-adoptive families in the form of cash, equipment, supplies, food, toys, clothes, medical assistance, training, foster care sponsorship, volunteer services, and renovating old facilities or building new ones, etc.
- The nanny-to-child ratio has improved from an average of 1:20 to around 1:5. In some orphanages it is 1:3.
- Orphanage care takers are receiving regular child care trainings and education.
- Medical clinics have moved from a novelty to a common part of an orphanage.
- Children's entertainment centers for different ages of children are not difficult to find.
- Building a rehab center or clinic for special needs children is becoming a new fashion trend among orphanages.
- Approximately 33% of abandoned children are now living with their foster parents.
- More and more Chinese are inspired to adopt as a result of their encounters with international adoptive families.

- The infant mortality rate in orphanages is moving closer to the Chinese national average, which is 1.5%.
- As a result of the growing global interest in Chinese orphanages, the government is allocating more funding to support orphanage improvement to display their care for the children.
- Countless American families who had never thought about adoption have decided to open their hearts and homes to an abandoned child after positive interaction with and encouragement by families who have adopted children from China.

These are just a few of the life-changing results brought about by international adoption and adoptive families like yours.

A few months ago, a group of orphanage directors and civil affairs officials came to Denver to visit our agency and the children adopted from their orphanages. On the way to the airport, Ms. Zhu, Director of Fushun Orphanage, took my hand and with tears in her eyes, said to me, “American adoptive families seem to love their adopted children even more than we love our own birth children. I feel so fortunate to be a part of this miracle. It inspires me to work harder with my staff to ensure that we can provide the same kind of love to the children in our orphanage.”

You see, adoption is really more than an isolated and individual process. Whether you are aware of it or not, our act of love, our search to fulfill our own dreams, and our efforts to expand our own families have a much larger and unexpected impact on many others, especially on the lives of many other abandoned children. Your adoption child-rearing fee helps improve the living conditions for the children left behind. Your loving act while you are adopting in China educates and inspires millions of Chinese around you. And your enthusiasm to share your story with others often results in a chain reaction of many others reaching out to another homeless child.

As a result of the unprecedented economic success that has raised the overall living standard in China, the preference to have a smaller family among the younger generation, and the lax enforcement of the government’s one-child policy over the past thirty years, China has started to see a gradual decline in abandonment. That’s great news. Nothing would make us happier than to see no children abandoned in China. Unfortunately, it might take a few more decades for such a fundamental political and social shift to occur in a country of 1.3 and soon to be 1.5 billion, and in a country where male preference and carrying on one’s family’s name are deeply rooted in a 5,000-year-old tradition. Until that day, thousands of children will wait in orphanages for their chance to be loved by a forever family.

Adopting a child internationally has never been an easy undertaking. It involves tons of paperwork, it deals with unpleasant bureaucracies, it demands scrutiny of your private life, it requires tremendous financial resources, and most of all, it is an unbearably LONG waiting process! Is it worth it? Everyone who has survived the ordeal and has a child in their arms says yes; many in the waiting process are understandably not entirely sure yet. But I can guarantee you that after this agonizing episode of your life is over and when you finally hold your beautiful child in your arms, you will truly comprehend the magnitude and impact of your labor of love.

Mr. Lu Ying, the Director-General of China Center of Adoption Affairs, shared with me a touching story last year. He led an official delegation to visit some adoptive families in New York. A couple

in their fifties came to the gathering with their eighteen-year-old daughter who was adopted when she was four. When the parents proudly told Mr. Lu that their daughter had just been accepted to Harvard University, he became speechless. “That would be unimaginable and impossible in China!” He told me. “That is the beauty of international adoption – the life-changing opportunity.”

Adoption changes our own lives, changes a child’s life, and changes the lives of many in China and around the world. Adoption is bigger than any one individual.